DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 303 770 CS 009 509

AUTHOR Lang, Deborah Odom; Lang, William Steve
TITLE Behavior Modification Revisited: Practical Application for the Reading Teacher.
PUB DATE Nov 87
NOTE 9p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Georgia Educational Research Association (Atlanta, GA, November 3-4, 1987).
PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150) -- Reports - Research/Technical (143)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Behavior Modification; Elementary Education; Grade 2; Grade 5; Reading Attitudes; *Reading Habits; *Reading Instruction; Reading Processes; Reading Research; Teaching Methods
IDENTIFIERS *Reading Motivation

ABSTRACT

An informal study examined the impact of a simple behavior modification procedure on the reading habits of second and fifth grade students. Behavior modification theory was pared down to two rules ("reinforce proper behavior" and "reinforce anything close to proper behavior") so that no additional burdens would be placed on reading teachers' time and budgets. Subjects, 36 fifth graders and 23 second graders, received a sticker any time they read anything for fun or work. No attempt was made to gather data on reinforcement schedules used or whether the children were being honest in their self-reports of reading. However, findings suggest that: (1) children assigned their own value to the stickers; (2) the frequency of books read increased for all subjects; (3) the children learned that there is more to the reading process than simply finding answers to textual information; (4) children internalized their reading behavior by having the desire to read on their own; and (5) children transferred the reading behavior to situations and settings other than the classroom. (RS)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

ED303770

Behavior Modification Revisited: Practical Application for the Reading Teacher

Deborah Odom Lang and William Steve Lang

Running head: Behavior Modification

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

William Steve Lang

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.

Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.

Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

CS005509

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

Behavior Modification Revisited: Practical Application for the Reading Teacher

The impracticality of behavior modification as taught in most education classes and as it is perceived by most classroom teachers limits this technique from common usage.

Behavior modification has long been recognized as a powerful tool for changing an undesirable behavior into a more desirable one. Maheady, Duncan and Sainato emphasize "...the effectiveness of behavior modification techniques has been well-documented for a number of years in the empirical literature...to date no other intervention system has been shown to produce similar results." However, many educators do not allow this tool to work for them because "they feel it is inappropriate in the classroom; or they have heard of it but don't feel competent to use it; or tried it and it didn't work" (Maheady, Duncan & Sainato, 1982). The classroom teacher need not be an "expert" on the pros and cons of a token economy to utilize the principles involved any more than a housewife needs to be a chemist to use laundry detergent.

In required educational psychology classes every teacher was exposed to the "rules" of behavior modification. These generally are complex and time consuming with phrases like "target the behavior," "task analysis," and "token economy" (Owen, Froman & Moscow, 1981). A quick look in the schools reveals that most teachers have heard of these concepts, but the main use of this technique is in special education. It seems clear that regular teachers feel that behavior modification is too complex, time

consuming, expensive, or even inappropriate to their subject (Maheady, Duncan & Sainato). Many times teachers are reluctant to use behavior modification techniques even though they have learned about it in theory.

Reading teachers in particular are challenged to cultivate within the child a natural desire to pick up a book and read for pleasure. Besides making the teacher's job easier because the child "learns to read by reading," the internalization of reading as a desirable activity is ever more under attack from television, video games and computers. Behavior modification has long been recognized by special education and psychology as an effective way to change behavior and the emotions that correspond to a given object or environment. How can the reading teacher take advantage of this science without additional burdens on their time and budgets? Using two fifth grade language arts classes and one second grade self-contained we decided to try a little experiment.

The Plan

We set out to eliminate rules. Treiber and Lahey (1983) summarize "Teachers will likely adopt intervention strategies that are convenient and feasible within the restrictive demands of the classroom. Intervention methods that require one-to-one instruction, excessive preparation time, or that detract from other instructional programs will be less likely to be used." The minimum for a behavior modification system is two. First, one must reinforce proper behavior. Second, one must reinforce anything close to proper behavior. We specifically did not determine "baselines," "reinforcement schedules," or "behaviors to extinguish."

Next, we determined that the cheapest and easiest reinforcers were verbal praise or paper stickers. In order to save time we settled on stickers. We used whatever we could find that was cheap and any type of sticker is appropriate. Two classes of fifth graders (N = 36) and one class of second graders (N = 23) were told that any time they read anything, for fun or work, they would receive a sticker. The stickers were not tradeable for prizes and no rewards were offered. No contracts, competitions, or punishments were discussed. In fact, any value in the stickers was self-imposed by the children. There were no differences between the rules for the fifth and second graders.

What Happened

The sticker system was used with the fifth graders for an entire year and the second graders for six months to present. The children put stickers they earned mostly on their work folders, books, desks and occasionally on each other. There was immediate interest and the fifth graders read many books in order to earn stickers. Some of the fifth graders would come to get a sticker when they had not really read the book. However, that was acceptable because the more they handled, looked at, and carried books around, the more likely they were to read one once in a while.

Even though the stickers held the interest of all fifth graders at times, interest was sporadic from day to day and individual to individual. The librarian reported that this fifth grade class had the greatest number of book sales at the book fair compared to all other classes (K-12) in the school. Parents of fifth graders reported that their children enjoyed receiving the stickers. Parents also reported increased reading

at home. An interesting sidelight was that many children appeared to be attempting to read and complete books beyond the instructional reading level. Naturally, in attempting to make the system work for the teacher no "scientific" data was collected or stickers counted.

As for second graders, the enthusiasm for the stickers was more consistent than with the fifth graders. Second graders on the whole would not accept the sticker unless they read the entire book. During sticker time several second graders would sit at their desks reading books and be passed by if they were not finished when stickers were given. Of course, they sometimes asked for stickers outside of "sticker-time" but the teacher only gave stickers once a day.

The teacher reported that second graders have brought books from home and formed a library in the classroom. They also have increased their book club and magazine orders since the advent of the sticker system. Additionally, the librarian states that an effective punishment for this class is to restrict the privilege of checking out books! (We do not condone punishing misbehavior in this way; we just thought the report was relevant.) One second grade parent of a below average student reported that his child "loved to read" and he was constantly carrying about a bookbag full of his favorites.

Both the second and fifth graders appeared to make the stickers more valuable by racing each other to see who could get the most, collecting certain categories of stickers, and keeping constant count of the number of stickers they had accumulated. We noticed that fifth graders preferred animal stickers, realism, and popular characters such as Pac-Man and Star Wars heroes. It did not matter to the system so the teacher provided

mostly what they asked for with the exception of seasonal stickers which were sometimes less expensive. Second graders liked to receive animals and fanciful characters like cartoon figures.

Second graders picked "scratch and sniff" items but these are expensive for the teacher unless homemade. Fortunately, some school magazines send free "scratch and sniff" stickers. The ingenuity of the teacher kept the total bill for the year to less than $50 for the fifth grade. We used commercially produced products to save time for the teacher but that is obviously not the cheapest.

Summary

If one were to take apart the simplicity of the system it would be obvious that successive approximation, reinforcement, and extinction are components of the sticker method. Also, we (purposefully) did not collect baseline data or draw learning curves. We really have no idea if the teacher used any particular reinforcement schedule or exactly how honest the children were in reporting what they had read even though we suspect that an effective schedule was used and that most of the children read what they said they did.

We think there is evidence for the following conclusions:

1. Children assigned their own value to the stickers without the teacher's worrying about "what is reinforcing."

2. The frequency of books read in these classes increased as a result of the behavior system.

3. Children learned that there is more to the reading process than simple finding answers to textual information.

4. Children began to internalize their reading by actually having the desire to read "on their own."

5. Children transferred the reading behavior to situations and settings other than the classroom.

Because of the ease of this type system and its use of only five minutes a day in the classroom, the only possible drawback is the expense which is nominal compared to anything we can think of that has this much effect.

References

Owen, Froman & Moscow. Educational psychology: An introduction. Boston: Little, Brown & Company, 1981.

Maheady, L., Duncan, D., & Sainto, D. A survey of use of behavior modification techniques by special education teachers. Teacher Education and Special Education, 1982, 4, 9-15.

Treiber, F., & Lahey, B. Toward a behavioral model of academic remediation with learning disabled children. Journal of Learning Disabilities, 1983, 16(2), 111-116.